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<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13555502.2015.1058084>

The Stories of My Life: Disraeli in Politics and Prose

Disraeli: The Romance of Politics, by Robert O’Kell, Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2013. x + 595 pages, illustrated, £66.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-4426-4459-5.

This literary life of Benjamin Disraeli is the most important book to be published on this intriguing figure in at least a decade, and represents a lifetime’s labour: O’Kell has been publishing on Disraeli and his writings since the 1970s. Genuinely interdisciplinary, it moves beyond the usual conventions of the literary biography, which often focuses on exploring how the context of the subject’s life has shaped the works, sometimes resulting in a *roman à clef* approach to the interpretation of fiction. Instead, O’Kell suggests a complex and ‘truly reciprocal’ relationship between Disraeli’s fiction and his political career, which he characterises by Disraeli’s own term ‘Psychological Romance’ (vii). His central preoccupation is how Disraeli uses his fiction to explore and resolve the tensions between his political ambitions and his desire for personal integrity. But equally O’Kell demonstrates how Disraeli used his literary imagination to inform his parliamentary rhetorics and to emplot his political machinations. Disraeli appears as the arch-fabricator of himself and the political cultures around him: this is, perhaps, no news, but never has it been shown in such depth and at such length. For the Victorianist, O’Kell’s *magnum opus* is an exemplar of interdisciplinary methodology, and offers a refreshing re-interpretation of Disraeli’s political life and literary works, in which both are seen as ‘enactments of the same urgencies and purposes’ (8). It is a substantial contribution to the study of Victorian political culture, which has been enriched by the recognition that it was shaped by, and expressed through, literary and visual genres and media: Rohan McWilliam on the melodrama of radical politics, or Janice Carlisle on the visualisation of parliamentary reform, offer similarly sophisticated examples of interdisciplinary analysis which has advanced our understanding of the Victorian political experience.

O’Kell argues that, from his earliest novel, *Vivian Grey* (1826), Disraeli was engaged in the ‘imaginative shaping of his political career’ (7). The real-life basis of the novel was his abortive involvement in the attempt to establish a new newspaper, *The Representative*, in which he had ‘a chance to act out a fantasy in which he imagined himself possessed of great power and influence’ (15). Most of his early fictions, such as *Contarini Fleming* (1832), are – in O’Kell’s opinion – literary platforms on which Disraeli projects a meteoric political career, while wrestling with a sense of social inferiority and a fear of the loss of personal purity, often associated with a nurturing female figure (a conscious and unconscious tribute to the role of his sister Sarah in providing emotional support). Such an association of the attention of adoring women with the maintenance of personal integrity is used very effectively to explain Disraeli’s continued adherence to his lover, Henrietta Sykes, which – in the early 1830s – could well have compromised his emerging political career. O’Kell is always conscious of Disraeli’s crab-like strategies for defining his own identity. In his analysis of *Henrietta Temple* (1837), for instance, O’Kell notes how previous critics ‘have resisted an autobiographical reading’ (106), because the central character, the Catholic Ferdinand Armine, seemed so unlike the young Disraeli. By contrast, O’Kell argues that Disraeli ‘adopts the Catholic disguise of his Jewish heritage for the purpose of establishing in his own fiction the issue of his ambivalence about himself’ (106). Disraeli’s ambiguous attitude to Catholicism becomes all the more explicable as a means of dealing at a distance with his own Semite ancestry, and is a theme which he returns to in more detached way in his later novel, *Lothair* (1837).

One of the strengths of O’Kell’s discussion of Disraeli’s early career is his attention – alongside the novels – to Disraeli’s polemical works, such as *A Revolutionary Epick* (1834), *Vindication of the English Constitution* (1835), and *Letters from Runnymede* (1836). One of the most illuminating sections is his analysis of the *Vindication*, where he points out that the influence of Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, is not only to be traced in Disraeli’s claim of a continuous heritage of Tory principles, but also in his identification of Bolingbroke as a personal role model: a rakeish newcomer who shared Disraeli’s passion for propaganda and diplomacy, and his reputation for opportunism. One of the most insightful elements of O’Kell’s work is, in fact, is his recognition that Disraeli’s articulation of Tory ideology and his political opportunism are one and the same, resolving the old argument over whether we should see Disraeli as an ideologue or a careerist. For O’Kell, Disraeli’s defence of (a regenerate) aristocracy is not so much a reactionary celebration of the status quo as a justification for the leadership of a naturally superior elite (which would necessarily include such outstanding newcomers as himself). In place of Bolingbroke’s ‘Patriot King’, Disraeli imagines a ‘Patriot Prime Minister’ – which is exactly what he makes himself.

Indeed, O’Kell’s analysis of Disraeli’s early fiction as power fantasies explains his angry reaction to Peel’s failure to offer him a cabinet appointment in his new government of 1841: ‘he could not imagine how his genius and demonstrated talents did not override the claims of all but the noblest and most distinguished of the aristocracy (205). Accordingly, of course, Disraeli became the central and most vocal figure in a Tory opposition group, Young England, his political career increasingly taking on ‘the character of a fiction’ (211). O’Kell argues that *Coningsby* (1844) should be seen less as a political novel about Young England, and more as ‘a truly brilliant and witty displacement of personal motives and public objects’ (212), in which the eponymous hero represents an idealised and successful version of Disraeli, and his mentor, the mysterious Sidonia, ‘his other alienated self’ (217). *Coningsby* is, in O’Kell’s opinion, ‘chiefly concerned with his conflicts of identity ... politics, while an integral part of the work, is essentially a motif within the genre of “psychological romance”’ (230) – which is a reading he extends to the bizarre *Tancred* (1847) too. O’Kell’s re-interpretation of *Coningsby* is matched by an equally illuminating re-interpretation of *Sybil* (1845), in which he presents it as a religious allegory, an assertion of the central role of the church and Christianity in the creation of a nation governed by a mixed constitution. Rather than representing the people, *Sybil* is for O’Kell an emblem of the church; so the marriage of the enlightened aristocrat, Egremont, to the (equally well-born) heroine is a wedding of ‘the compassionate secular nobility to the spirit of true piety and devotion in a pure Christian faith’ (278).

However, O’Kell’s coverage of Disraeli as a Young Englander might well have benefitted from reference to John Morrow’s perspective on the movement, which has demonstrated that its ideas were not entirely the politics of nostalgia, dealing rather more progressively with the results of industrialisation and the emergence of a new industrial aristocracy than O’Kell seems to imply. O’Kell’s insightful discussion of Disraeli’s parliamentary oratory in the 1840s offers compensation, demonstrating how Disraeli used the ‘heroic image of George Canning’ (242) and the circumstances of the 1828 Catholic Emancipation Crisis to devastating effect: Peel was effectively constructed as a hypocritical turncoat – even while Disraeli himself was opportunistically opposing the Maynooth Grant (thus jettisoning his apparent earlier sympathies for Roman Catholics) and defending the Corn Laws (despite no particular conviction of the utility of protectionism).

In the later chapters of the book, O’Kell excels in his exploration of Disraeli’s relationship with two key figures in Victorian political life, Gladstone and Queen Victoria. He ably dissects the Disestablishment Crisis of 1868, in which Disraeli’s penchant for intrigue let him down badly: his secretive negotiations with Manning to remedy the state of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland collapsed when Gladstone offered the more radical solution of disestablishment. The effect was to make Disraeli interpret the forthcoming election as ‘a great Protestant struggle’ (372), and to pursue a cack-handed policy of church patronage which favoured Evangelical over the Broad and High Church candidates. This ill-advised pattern of patronage was moderated by the influence of Victoria, with whom Disraeli developed an extraordinarily warm and effective relationship, a veritable romance of royalty. O’Kell argues that Disraeli’s chivalrous devotion to his ‘Faery’ Queen was not just a matter of political pragmatism, co-opting the queen as an informal ally for the Conservative party; it was also the genuine outcome of his belief in the unifying and beneficial power of the monarchy, most fully expressed in his promotion of the Royal Titles Bill which made Victoria Empress of India. It was her support for Disraeli, O’Kell argues, which allowed him to triumph at the Congress of Berlin in 1878: both shared a belief that Britain’s global power was threatened by Russia, against which the Ottoman Empire was a necessary bulwark.

O’Kell’s discussion of Disraeli’s last two completed novels, *Lothair* and *Endymion* (1880), suggests how these works engage with the political success of his maturity. *Endymion*, for instance, continues to develop the themes of his earlier life, embodying ‘the central fantasy of the family romance, in which the real parents, whose limitations the adolescent has come to recognize, are replaced by others of higher standing’ (429). In a final tribute to Sarah, Disraeli tells the story of a brother and sister who achieve political and social success, despite the early loss of parents and status, becoming respectively prime minister and queen consort of a European monarch. The sense of closure which this narrative suggests is confirmed by Disraeli’s unfinished novel, *Falconet*, which took as its central character – not a displaced version of himself – but a figure whom O’Kell identifies as Gladstone. Had the ageing Disraeli at last concluded his own self-creation?

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